

Caught Between Nature and Culture: Tensions Between Biological and Social Approaches to the Human Body

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The human body has always been a strong point of focus in archaeological research. It is not only the medium through which we live our lives, it is also part of the material traces of the past. Research surrounding the human body has developed in two opposite directions: it is either seen as a biological entity, its characteristics studied by bioarchaeologists, or it is seen as part of a social narrative, where aspects of identity are often studied by use of material culture. This dualism originates in the general split between the humanities and the natural sciences, that has marked western scholarship for ages. More recently, bioarchaeologists have tried to bridge this divide by including aspects of ‘social’ life in their studies of human remains. A key point is the plasticity of the human body, which is not only formed by biological developments, but by our relations with both the human and nonhuman world as well. However, the dualism remains. The aim of this presentation is to explore new paths and include the material world as well. The ultimate goal is to stop looking at the ‘material world’ and the ‘human body’ as different categories altogether and reach a more relational approach.